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ANALYSIS

▼ Info Access Plan Promises Power To Fed Users

By JENNIFER JONES

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A central federal data repository that citizens can tap into from their PCs, therefore, seems out of the question. But a public-domain software package that lets users access distributed databases over Internet might be the answer. The Wide Area Information Servers (WAIS) program does that, and many agencies are taking note.

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Moreover, hundreds of federal users will meet next month to discuss WAIS as a possible solution to what has long been an enigma: how to build the nuts and bolts of the much-ballyhooed national information infrastructure.

So far, "anybody dealing with the information infrastructure has not been going down to the level of, 'How do we do that?' I see [WAIS] as a way of doing that," said Eliot Christian, an official with the Information Services Division at the U.S. Geological Survey and founder of SIG-WAIS.

Brewster Kahle, the founding father of WAIS, said in a recent interview that WAIS is starting to make an impact where it counts. "WAIS is widely used in government," he said. "It is now mostly at the grassroots level, but it is making its way up to the policy level."

Indeed, its path to power has taken many turns. A Unix version of WAIS accessible through Internet was released in 1991, and it was adopted by many university

libraries as a search and retrieval tool.

Today WAIS server software is available for free from a clearinghouse funded by the National Science Foundation and located at the University of North Carolina.

But the government will need more than the public-domain software to access its complex databases, according to Kahle. "Agencies have too much data to just rely on the free server for very long," he said. "But that will allow them to get started without any commitment."

In order to tap the potential of the program, Kahle last year formed WAIS Inc. to develop commercial products using WAIS-based information services.

The Menlo Park, Calif.-based company in the next few months will open a Washington, D.C., area office to target the federal use of WAIS products and services.

"There is a huge market for integrators to help the government go through the transition to the information age," Kahle said. "This will also involve manufacturers of computer equipment, contractors and consultants all working on the WAIS protocol by sticking together."

Several agencies are mounting applications to put WAIS to work. Among them is USGS, which is trying to coordinate access to spatial data for geographic information systems.

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The spatial data application of WAIS is representative of the entire government's information distribution quandary. "The USGS is looking for an easy way to identify who's got what spatial data instead of putting it into a central repository," said Doug Nebert, a hydrologist with the Water Resources Division at USGS.

Another set of applications spearheading the WAIS movement is global change research. The research involves nine agencies and several organizations exploring such issues as the effect of volcanic emissions on regional and global climate.

Because global change research is "long-term, multifaceted and international," WAIS is a natural, Christian said.

Outside the purely scientific arena, WAIS applications will be on the agenda April 26 when the Solomons Group meets to explore using WAIS as a building block for a Government-Wide Information Inventory Locator System.

The group, which includes IT officials from throughout the government, has been meeting off and on since 1991 to devise a policy for liberalizing public access to government information.

"I think launching a locator directory of government information is the same thing Clinton asked for when he asked for easier access to information," Christian said. ◀

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But the government will need more than the public-domain software to access its complex databases, according to Kahle. "Agencies have too much data to just rely on the free server for very long," he said. "But that will allow them to get started without any commitment."

In order to tap the potential of the program, Kahle last year formed WAIS Inc. to develop commercial products using WAIS-based information services.

The Menlo Park, Calif.-based company in the next few months will open a Washington, D.C., area office to target the federal use of WAIS products and services.

"There is a huge market for integrators to help the government go through the transition to the information age," Kahle said. "This will also involve manufacturers of computer equipment, contractors and consultants all working on the WAIS protocol by sticking together."

Several agencies are mounting applications to put WAIS to work. Among them is USGS, which is trying to coordinate access to spatial data for geographic information systems.

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By JENNIFER JONES

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But the government will need more than the public-domain software to access its complex databases, according to Kahle. "Agencies have too much data to just rely on the free server for very long," he said. "But that will allow them to get started without any commitment."

In order to tap the potential of the program, Kahle last year formed WAIS Inc. to develop commercial products using WAIS-based information services.

The Menlo Park, Calif.-based company in the next few months will open a Washington, D.C., area office to target the federal use of WAIS products and servers.

"There is a huge market for integrators to help the government go through the transition to the information age," Kahle said. "This will also involve manufacturers of computer equipment, contractors and consultants all working on the WAIS protocol by sticking together."

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ANALYSIS



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By JENNIFER JONES

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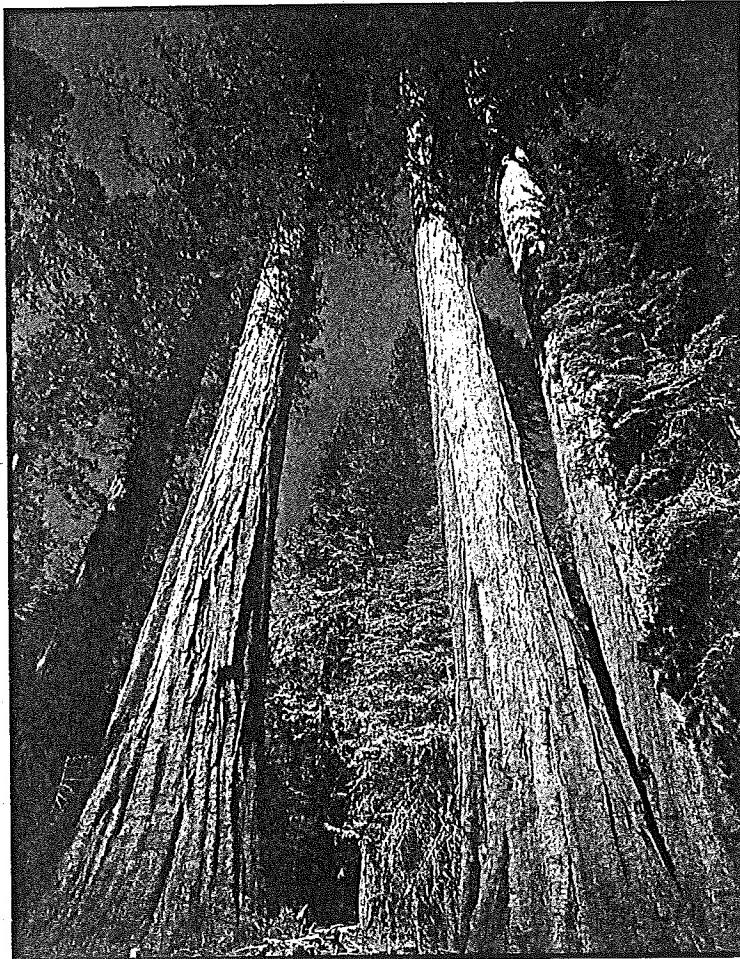
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DANY KRIST/UNIPHOTO

New Hope for Old Growth

Interior's biomapping project would target old-growth forests — the nation's most diverse habitats — wetlands and National Park preserves.

National Computer Map Survey To Troubleshoot Eco Conflicts

By JOHN MOORE

The Interior Department is

closed the project earlier this month, hopes to establish the biological survey as a permanent

Price Data Could Gut Schedules

By JOANNE CONNELLY

A standoff between the General Services Administration and major software vendors reached a boiling point last week, as government buyers faced the real prospect of fewer products represented on the new multiple-award schedules beginning April 1.

Industry sources said several popular software packages, including those from Microsoft Corp. and Lotus Development Corp., could be excluded from the new schedules unless an agreement is reached on the amount of pricing data these companies must submit to GSA. At press time, GSA was still negotiating with vendors for year-long schedules.

"There is a very real possibility that some very major software products will not be represented on the schedule," said Larry Allen, executive director of the Coalition for Government Procurement.

Hardware Vendors Affected Too

Hardware vendors are also affected by GSA's data demands. A spokeswoman for Apple's Federal Systems Group declined to comment on rumors that some of its products will not appear on the GSA schedules for lack of appropriate pricing data. "The doors are still open," she said, but she added